

GENDER, SOCIAL CLASS AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Education via Schools helps in the socialisation process and the overall training of individuals (male and female) for personal and societal development. The school as an agent of socialisation and education is meant to cater for all irrespective of sex. The attitude of girls and women to Technical Education can to a large extent, be determined by socio-economic status of their parents. This paper examines critically how gender and social class are significant factors or variables in the choice of Technical subjects for study. Examination of problems of women in Technical Education suggests that socio-economic, cultural, gender and class are powerful impediments, which prevent women from patronising Technical Education courses. These are critically analysed and exemplified by a discussion on some research findings on the attitude of girls and women to Technical Education vis-à-vis the perceptions of parents about women in technology. The paper concludes by providing some suggestions for improvement towards the process of destereotyping the girls' educational aspirations. Among which include, educating parents and women about the confining effects of sex stereotyping and also provision of more job opportunities for women to enable them take new roles, in the society.

INTRODUCTION

The Universal declaration of human rights which asserts the right of everyone to education also states that the right of human beings shall not be subjected to distinctions in terms of race, colour, sex, and class. The law in Nigeria lays down no difference in the mode for boys' and girls' education, but in practice, girls are generally educationally underprivileged in the country. The position of women education is still relegated to the background especially in technical education.

The concept, structure and process of schooling and technical education remain male dominated to an extraordinary degree. Women are found in a very limited range of industries as well as educational sectors. Access to post secondary school education and training of courses for women remains restricted by many factors (Chisolm & Holland, 1986 pp. 355-356)

The position of women generally within the structure of society has always been such that they are relegated to the background in almost all spheres of life endeavours, including education and occupation, etc. Gender inequality is more severe in technical education which is sex-stereotyped characterised by old-fashion ideas of parents and women about sex or/and of social class has caused her to be affected in other spheres of life. This is so because education is important instrument for the development of individual and the society at large. It is against this background that this paper examines critically how gender and social class are determinants for enrolment or study of technical subjects.

Definition of Terms

The term gender is a social concept, which seeks to construct masculinity (male) and femininity (female), in a given society. It refers to the process that creates division of roles, responsibilities, advantages and disadvantages, power and wealth between men and women. Gender is also used to describe social relationships between men and women. The concept of gender is also to explain the inequalities between men and women, individually and socially in different areas based on social and political realities expressed through power relations and social positions. Gender is not a matter of biology but of social convention.

The issue of gender is closely linked with female marginalisation. In most countries of the world today (Nigeria inclusive) there have been crisis of marginalisation of women in politics, education, economics, etc. This has led to various movements of women empowerment all over the world. For example, the establishment of Federal Ministry for Women Affairs as well as State Ministries for Women Affairs across the country is no doubt a good step towards creating opportunities for women to participate in national development.

35

Blakemore & Cooksey (1981) have defined social class as a major dimension of social stratification. Social classes are abstract categories, which are defined according to differences in occupation, property ownership, and/or relationship to the mean among the members of society.

It is the arrangement of members of the society into strata or hierarchy based on wealth, prestige, power, etc. The traditional classification of society is working/lower, middle, and upper classes. Social stratification and social class may emerge due to reasons of education, politics, religion, occupation etc. It must however be noted that just like the society is not stable, social classes are not stable. In fact one can move from one class to another by reason as above.

TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Technical education has been defined by the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981) as that "aspect of education which leads to the acquisition of practical and applied skills as well as basic scientific knowledge" (p. 28). The NPE (1981) clearly spelt out the aims of Technical Education as follows:

- (a) To provide trained manpower in applied science, technology and commerce particularly at sub-professional grades.
- (b) To provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development.
- (c) To provide people who can apply scientific knowledge to the improvement and solution of environmental problems for the use and convenience of man.
- (d) To give an introduction to professional studies in engineering and other technologies.
- (e) To give training and impart the necessary skills leading to the production of craftsmen, technicians and other skilled personnel who will be enterprising and self-reliant and
- (f) To enable our young men and women to have an intelligent understanding of the increasing complexity of technology (p. 28)

The above mentioned aims are clear, explicit, and of course never bias either on the basis of gender or social class (socio-economic status). It is in the light of this that one wonders the severe domination of technical education by men, leading to the marginalisation of women in the area. In other words, why are technical education courses sex-stereotyped? Furthermore, it can be realised that the fundamental aim of technical education as stipulated in the NPE (1981) is geared primarily to the technological development of a self-reliant nation. This, of course, demands the participation of men and women, thus, this calls for equal access to technical education without gender or social class prejudice.

GENDER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION:

Differences exists in the rates of enrolment, degree of participation and duration of study in Technical Education Institutions in the country today. Participation patterns are reversed, more boys than girls attend and complete schooling, in Technical Education Programmes.

This leaves girls in a position of weakness. Girls participation in education, for example, continues to trail behind that of boys especially since gender plays a major role in determining who goes to school in the first place. This is amply displayed by school enrolment trends which indicate a slower rate of increase for girls.

No doubt the obvious gender disparity in Technical Education is caused by many factors.

1. Traditional attitudes of the assigned roles of men and women both at the domestic level and public realm.
2. Some parents have not understood both the importance of education of girls as well as the benefits of girls' education.
3. The economic constraints of some parents.

Throughout the world, females are the victims of educational inequalities. This is not an isolated phenomenon but directly reflects the monopoly or semi-monopoly which men enjoy in the higher levels of the economy and polity. It is common in Africa for sons to receive education before daughters resulting to considerable inequalities of enrolment at the post primary level (Blakemore & Cooksey, 1981 p.59).

The under enrolment of girls and young women in schools, generally, and Technical Education Schools and Colleges, in particular, can be attributed to reasons such as background, culture, and/or rural urban imbalance. However, a recent study reports that occupations like engineering, electrical and working in factories were sex-stereotyped, thus were regarded by parents as men's jobs (Mahuta, 1996).

Furthermore, in the same study by Mahuta (Op.cit) majority of parents (66.7%) accepted uncritically that men and women should do different jobs. They also argued that they would be disappointed if their children took jobs stereotypically associated with the opposite sex. In the study of Hoebel and Weaver (1979) they observed differential treatment of boys and girls and identified three trends in this regard (a) a high degree of separation of men and women in space work and leisure activities (b) status inferiority of women relative to men and (c) women's spheres of interest and influence limited to domestic work. However, such trend may not be unconnected with the way society sees men and women as being different by way of physiological criteria in what is observed as sexual stratification.

Nigeria needs capable minds and hands to man her industries without prejudice to gender and background of citizens. Men and women should be seen as partners in progress and development of the society in which they found themselves.

SOCIAL CLASS AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Social class is yet another fundamental factor that affects enrolment of students into technical Education courses in our schools and colleges. Parental income, occupation and education (Socio-economic status) are extremely important determinants of school environment in Technical Education. Poor parents can often only afford to educate some of their children, even when education is free. They may decide to send their sons rather than their daughters. Socio-economic status of parents is quite another variable that determines enrolment into technical education schools. Dubey, Edem and Thakur (1979) rightly observed that:

Educational opportunities are not fully dependent on the basis of intelligence. It is useful to remember that those who go to poor Primary and Secondary schools do not do so necessarily because they are intellectually inferior. It is rather that were not given the same social and educational advantages because of the social position of their families (p.16).

Furthermore, the trend to shift educational costs to parents, in the some of cost-sharing is especially likely to work against girls' education (Kinyanjui, 1993, Namuddu, 1994). When fees were introduced in Nigeria between 1982 and 1986, primary enrolment declined from 92% to 75% (Obadina, 1993). The cost of schooling vis-à-vis the cost of living today has made it difficult for the poor parents to send their daughters to school or bear the burden of financing their education.

However, when decisions have to be made because of the financial constraints, girls are more likely than boys to be held back or be withdrawn from school. A recent study reported that girls from middle and upper class (better-off) homes, are more likely to enrol and attain higher qualification than those from poor (working/lower class) (Mahuta, 1996).

PROBLEMS HINDERING THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Women encounter a lot of problems with regards to their participation in technical education. These problems however cannot be totally divorced from the general problems facing women education in Nigeria.

The first and foremost problem that hinders women participation in technical education is physiological constraints. Technical education incorporates training in such professional areas as wood work, carpentry, electrical and electronics, mechanics etc most of which require physical exertion of the body. Most women cannot cope with the rigorous training associated with these fields. Little wonder then why it is uncommon in Nigeria today to see women who are carpenters, bricklayers, mechanics etc. This is simply due to physiological reasons which have made girls and women to have negative attitude towards Technical Education, thereby making the course sex-stereotyped.

Another problem worthy of mention is that of gender (i.e. the sex roles ascribed by the society to males and females). Parents and families in many parts of this country strongly consider some occupations as a result such occupation become exclusively reserve for men occupations as carpentry, mechanics etc are seen as reserved for men. Thus people may be surprised to hear a woman undertaking a course in carpentry or building technology in the polytechnic. As a result of this, women take to such academic courses as in the Arts and social sciences to the neglect of technical courses. It should however be noted that this trend is rapidly changing as a result of the increase in complexity of the society, and in realisation of the fact that the education of men and women is equally important and of course needed to join the global village in the scientific and technological development and appreciation.

There is also the feeling of inferiority on the part of women. Because men have dominated the field of technical education and couple with the fact that the society does not reckon such areas with women, they tend to believe that they could not do well in these areas. However, it is the socio-cultural beliefs of some quarters in the country that made women to dogmatically accept that they cannot perform in the areas of Technical Education.

Fourthly, technical education in the recent past have suffered neglect compared to other types of education. It is considered inferior to other types of education. This problems has accounted for low enrolment in this field over the years even among the males.

Another obstacle is the inadequate finance on the part of the parents (i.e. economic crises). Where parents are financially handicapped males get advantage in terms of who should be trained with the limited income. Thus, even if a girl has interest in technical education and the parents are handicapped financially, she will not be able to realise her dreams. This is moreso that technical education requires additional expenses for purchase of implements and other facilities for the programme. Again the poor infrastructural facilities such as roads, drinking water, housing, electricity, are but few frustrations experienced by women in this direction.

The domestic or family demand on the part of women especially when they are married serves as a hindrance to the effectiveness and efficiency in putting their skill to practice. Technical Education enables people to acquire functional skills to be able to engage themselves in self employment e.g. carpenters, electricians, bricklayers etc. It is clear, from a number of studies on the education of females (e.g. Junaid: 1993), that the most important single life chance a woman has is the understanding and vision or the limitation of her husband. If the husband has a negative attitude to women education in society even her chance of continuing her education are limited let alone her access to jobs outside the homes. This underscores the need to conscientize husband on the importance of women education and to realise the role of women in the technological development of our changing society.

CONCLUSION

What this paper has done was to critically analyse gender, social class and Technical Education. We have seen that gender and social class are significant factors or variables which determines the choice of Technical Education as a course of study. We have also seen that gender which is an important factor for the study of Technical Education greatly affects the enrolment rate of girls in schools (to study Technical Education courses), their performance and achievement, retention as well as completion of Technical programmes. This largely, argued by the paper, is caused by parents' attitude to girls and women participation in Technology. Problems hindering women participation in Technical Education (e.g. Economic constraints, gender, e.t.c) were highlighted giving examples from empirical findings. The paper recommends strategies/measures for improvement with a view to providing equal opportunities to study Technical Education courses prejudice to sex-type or socio-economic backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To bring about change in the gender imbalance and the parental socio-economic crisis which affects girls' and women's choice of Technical Education subjects, the following measures are recommended:-

- (1) There should be an intensive programme for popularizing women participation in Technical Education this could be achieved by way of enlightenment campaigns e.g. Workshops/seminars and conferences, television broadcast e.t.c. These are all with a view to educating parents, girls and women and the general public on the value of women in Technology.
- (2) The role of guidance and counseling services cannot be overemphasised here. Counseling centres should be established properly in our schools and colleges to help girls and women have knowledge of their life abilities, interest, values, aptitudes and potentialities so that they can plan for their life more effectively, as well as the various opportunities open to them after school.
- (3) The general public should be properly educated to appreciate the importance of Technical Education for boys and girls in National Development and provision of self-reliance.
- (4) Technical Education clubs should be established in girls institutions, with a view to develop interest in girls to study Technical Education subjects.
- (5) Technical Education is a more expensive course especially when compared with Arts and Humanities. This, therefore, calls for government's continued efforts to train teachers in the area, supply the required facilities and equipments. This will, in no small measure, encourage the poor parents who wish their daughters to study Technical Education courses.
- (6) The centres for continuing education in the various states of the Federation should be well equipped and competent tutors employed for the maximum benefits of the recipients (girls and women).
- (7) Government should encourage and mobilize girls and women to take up new roles in society devoid of sex discrimination or bias and sex-stereotyping. Hence the development of society is the responsibility of both male and female.
- (8) Parents and women themselves should be properly mobilised with a view to changing their attitude to pursuing Technical Education. This will help in making parents and women to appreciate the value of Technical Education programmes.

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